

Housing Committee

Public Testimony of the CT Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

H.B. 6590: *An Act Concerning Certain Protections For Group And Family Child Care Homes*

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For nearly fifty years, CWEALF has been a leader in the development of policy solutions that enhance women's economic security, combat discrimination and increase gender equity.

CWEALF urges the committee to support H.B. 6590: *An Act Concerning Certain Protections For Group And Family Child Care Homes*.

Access to affordable, quality child care is essential to support Connecticut's workforce; however, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a 2018 report indicated that 44% of Connecticut's population lived in a "child care desert," defined as an area with "little or no access to quality child care." The Office of Early Child (OEC) also estimated prior to COVID-19 that Connecticut was short 51,000 licensed child care spaces for infants and toddlers. Child care deserts are more likely to exist in geographic areas with higher percentages of rural, low-income, Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino families.

The COVID-19 crisis has threatened the collapse of an already fragile system of child care in Connecticut. Research shows the pandemic could result in the loss of almost half (48%) of Connecticut's child care supply, or 46,349 slots.¹ Lack of access to child care is compounded by issues with affordability: research shows that in Connecticut, 8 in 10 families cannot afford the full cost of high quality infant and toddler care, including 94% of families of color.² Connecticut's huge child care shortage means many parents, particularly mothers, can't afford to work—which lowers families' incomes and hurts our state economy. Historically, child care is a feminized and undervalued profession which has led to lower pay for women, specifically women of color, that perpetuates the gender wage gap and threatens women's economic security.

As we continue to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 crisis, additional support and value of the contributions of women is critical to strengthen the child care sector overall.

¹ Essential Equity: Women, COVID-19 and Rebuilding CT. 2021. Retrieved from: <https://womenandgirls.ctdata.org/docs/Essential%20Equity%20Women%20Covid-19%20and%20Rebuilding%20CT.pdf>

² See note 1

Protecting and advancing family and group child care is one key strategy to increase Connecticut's supply of licensed child care, especially for families living in child care deserts, and support entrepreneurs that operate small child care businesses.

National survey data and anecdotal information from Connecticut show the demand for licensed, home-based childcare has increased while the supply has decreased since March 2020. Family child care is a critical component to Connecticut's child care shortage: families often prefer family child care because it offers culturally-competent care, costs less than center-based care and is available to those without stable means of transportation.

While licensed child care ensures that programs meet basic health and safety standards, family child care providers encounter significant zoning and housing barriers in seeking to become licensed. Despite Connecticut's stated goal of providing a regulated, safe, and accessible child care market, family child care providers face barriers that make it costly and sometimes impossible to open or maintain their businesses. Several states, including New York and California, have adopted protections against zoning restrictions and restrictive leases for home-based child care.

Connecticut must expand access to family and group child care by eliminating restrictive housing and zoning practices. This bill will protect children in group child care homes from exposure to lead, clarifies existing state protections that limit local zoning restrictions on family child care homes, extends the same protections to group child care homes and prohibits landlords from using restrictive leases to bar family child care homes.

House Bill No. 6590 is a critical step to remove barriers that make it difficult for child care providers to open family and group child care homes, which provide quality and accessible community-based care. It provides stronger statutory safeguards for home based child care, following the example of states across the nation and making Connecticut a model for others to follow. CWEALF urges the Committee to pass this critical legislation this year.